

Response to Channel 4 series The Miners' Strike 1984: the Battle for Britain

As NUM National Education Officer between 1983 and 1988, I had detailed knowledge of what happened within the NUM, in many of the coalfields and in North Derbyshire, which has been my home for many years. Please find below my comments about the three programmes.

Episode 1

- 1) This episode withheld from the audience the true role played by Robert Taylor, instead portraying him as a working miner who had been victimised by his local community and whose wife suffered mental ill-health as a result. It was not until Episode 3 that his role within the National Working Miners' Committee was revealed. Advised by David Hart and financed by donations apparently solicited by Hart from rich individuals, Taylor had taken his own union to court, resulting in sequestration of our funds.
- 2) It was claimed that Scargill called the miners out on strike, which is not true. As President of the NUM he had no power to do that. The NEC approved of the existing strikes in Yorkshire and Scotland, thus making them official. That body called a Special Delegate Conference on April 19 1984, at which a decision was taken to call on all NUM members to join the existing strike action.
- 3) This episode omitted to tell viewers that Ken Moses, Coal Board Area Director for North Derbyshire, instructed his staff to plot on a map the homes of NUM members. He then identified those who lived a long way away from a strike centre where help and hot food and food parcels could be obtained, as well as those who were a long way from where other miners lived. Members of management were then sent to visit those miners in their homes to browbeat and/or bribe them back to work. An elected Derbyshire NUM official watched that happening in one instance, but we knew of many other instances. That undoubtedly contributed to the bitterness felt by striking miners.
- 4) This episode devoted attention and time to intimidation of working miners. Only a very brief mention was made of the assault on a striking miner that broke several of his ribs and put him in hospital for, I believe, six days. He and his wife presumably would have said more about that, but we were not shown the footage. Again, only the briefest mention was made of that miner's time in prison.

Episode 2

This was excellent, matching very closely my own experiences as a picket on June 18 1984. As I am writing a book about what happened to the miners in the 1980's, I have interviewed a number of miners, including those also present at Orgreave on that day. All accounts match my experience and your Episode 2.

Episode 3

- 1) The briefest of mention was made of David Jones, the miner who was killed in Nottinghamshire. It would have been respectful to have named him, and it was certainly both disrespectful and misleading that his death was mentioned by a working miner's wife complaining of intimidation by strikers in almost the same breath. The viewer could easily have been led by the programme to believe that the murdered man was a working miner who had been killed by strikers. In fact he was a striking Yorkshire miner picketing at Ollerton colliery. It seems that there were National Front (a fascist organisation) members in the village that evening, apparently linking up with some of the working miners. David Jones was apparently killed by a blow on the head from something like a stone or a brick. As the culprit has never been identified, there has never been a prosecution for that crime.
- 2) Mention was made of "Scargill's strike" I explained under the heading "Episode 1" how the strike decision was reached. In none of the episodes did the programme-makers do credit to the huge role played by Peter Heathfield, NUM General Secretary, and to the role of Mick McGahey, Vice-president. Those three National Officials called themselves The Troika, pledging they would work together for the good of the union and its members. Nor did the programme-makers acknowledge the democratic decision-making processes via Special Delegate Conferences that took decisions about the dispute before, during and after the strike. Every decision was made by such a conference.
- 3) Anna Soubry was labelled as being from a midlands television programme, which presumably was correct, but Episode 3 should also have informed the viewers that she later became a Tory MP. She seemed to be making her own commentary later, expressing her opinion about "some people using others..." but as this was voice-over, it implied that those words were spoken by a neutral commentator, not by someone who had spent years as a Tory MP.
- 4) David Hart was the only dead person who was allowed to have someone else express his opinions, and those opinions, as claimed by his brother, were outrageous in places. Hart's brother claimed that Hart had attended some NUM rallies and had been "shocked" because they were "Nuremberg-like". While he was saying this, footage was shown of a gathering outside the NUM headquarters building St James's House at the time of an NEC meeting. It was tradition in the NUM for miners to gather outside NEC or other decision-making meetings in order to let the decision-makers know what the members felt about a current issue. I watched that gathering, which was merely a lobby, from my office window on the seventh floor of St James' House. There was no meeting, just a crowd milling about, many police officers around, with no

speakers organised. At one point, without any pre-planning or consultation with anyone else, Mick McGahey went out into the crowd and addressed them briefly. I watched this from my office window on the seventh floor. Footage was also shown of the rally outside the April 19 Special Delegate Conference. We knew that, according to tradition, many miners who were not delegates would be gathering outside that conference in order to lobby the delegates, so we decided that it would be a good idea to provide some speakers in order to engage their attention during the hours that the conference would last. I organised that rally in the space of three days. At its start I had merely secured a few promises from full-time NUM officials to speak. Those speakers would take up very little of the necessary time-span, so I improvised on the day by begging whoever I could find to speak as the morning went on. There were a few officials from local trades unions, the president of Chesterfield Trades Council, a representative of Sheffield Trades Council, some local councillors, and so on. An NUM branch official volunteered to sing two songs and cracked a joke, while Sean Cannon, one of the Dubliners folk group, sang a song. So, the alleged “Nuremberg-type rallies” that “shocked” David Hart were in actual fact one event of a crowd milling around outside a meeting-place, and one event of a lengthy, casual open-air rally, ending with a brief announcement from Scargill of the decision that had been made inside by the Special Delegate Conference. It is insulting to the NUM, and to me personally as organiser of the second event, to allow Hart’s brother to make the outrageous claim that they were like Nuremberg rallies. If the programme-makers thought it reasonable to have someone speak on behalf of the late David Hart without any challenge to the extreme views expressed, why did they not consider having someone to speak for some of the other late participants, such as Peter Heathfield?

- 5) The term “battle with Scargill” was used. This was not a duel between Thatcher and Scargill: the NUM had three national leaders, all forceful and substantial characters in their own right, and something approaching 200,000 members.
- 6) It was alleged, I believe by Hart’s brother, that Scargill said he wanted a totalitarian society. As a former employee of the NUM I am not a member of the Scargill fan-club that thinks he could do no wrong, but I am a person who demands truth and honesty from mass media documentaries. The accusation that Scargill wanted a totalitarian society is a lie. If someone says we want rid of our existing government, that is not the same as calling for a revolution to create a totalitarian society.
- 7) Footage was shown of Thatcher saying her Government was not going to intervene in the strike, yet no mention was made of the Cabinet papers that subsequently proved she did intervene, nor of the detailed admissions made in her memoir *The Downing Street Years* of the exact nature of her interventions. So she had been shown to have lied, but the programme made no mention of this.

- 8) The man called by the press “Silver Birch” claimed that the NUM was the most democratic union in the world “before this lot”, meaning before the left-wing leadership was elected. NUM history proves that is not true because Joe Gormley did a backroom deal with the Coal Board against the wishes of the membership and its elected leaders, and because Nottinghamshire Area had defied a democratic national decision in order to enter a deal that brought them better bonuses because of the more favourable conditions in their coalfield. The left-wing national leadership from 1983 onwards made a point of convening Special Delegate Conferences, as previously stated, to take decisions. No challenge was made to the incorrect claim made by “Silver Birch”.
- 9) John Paul Getty was named as a donor who funded the Working Miners’ Committee. Yet no mention was made of his earlier donation to the Miners’ Solidarity Fund set up to assist striking miners and their families.

I look forward to your response to these criticisms. Such a response may possibly avert a formal complaint to Ofcom.

Hilary Cave